

Women and the skilled trades

When we are young, most of us are told, "You can be anything you want to be." But, for various reasons, including sex stereotyping, few women follow their inclinations.

This folder consists of interviews with eight women who were determined to follow their natural bent—women such as Deborah Davies, an apprentice plumber from Ingersoll, and Bonnie Berta, an apprentice saw filer-fitter from Sudbury. These women are pioneering in the male-dominated terrain of the skilled trades. They were selected at random; their working conditions may not necessarily reflect those of other people in the trades.

Women should no longer eliminate thoughts of a career in a trade because of its traditionally "un-feminine" status. The Ontario Human Rights Code enforces the principle that it's the ability to do the job that counts. And, to quote Wendy Labrecque, a Toronto apprentice auto body mechanic, "when you want to do a job and you like doing it, success is a certainty!"

For further information about Ontario's apprenticeship training program, contact

Supervisor of Resident Counsellors
Industrial Training Branch
Ministry of Colleges and Universities
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Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1Y7
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and be sure to examine the booklet *Training for the Skilled Trades, Ontario's Apprenticeship Program*.

● "My dad used to be in the navy, so when I was little he would take me down to the ship's engine room to explain and point out everything to me. But I really didn't get interested in being a machinist until he began working in maintenance in the same plant with me. Whenever a machine I was using broke down, he would come over and say, 'Wouldn't you like to be able to fix it yourself, daughter?' as he plunked down his tools. So I decided to enter the trade.

"When I applied for training to become a machinist, the man who interviewed me said, 'That's not a very feminine job you're applying for.' I responded, 'That's not a very masculine job you've got sitting at that desk.' He agreed and gave me the apprenticeship papers!

"I'm not a rough type of girl but I can still do the job. The first week I was here the guys would constantly run over to help when I wanted to lift something—as if I couldn't do it myself. But they've stopped doing that now.

"Until recently, I was a drill hand. I set up and

Caroline Friesman, 28
Machinist
Wabco Limited
475 Seaman Street
Stoney Creek, Ontario

changed over spindle drills and ran radial and gang drills. The company is now training me on numerically controlled equipment.

"I'm the only woman in the department and it doesn't bother me at all. I've had all sorts of funny experiences that I really enjoy. The first day in the shop I wore a flowered apron. The guys didn't say anything but the next morning all of them came in wearing flowered aprons!

"One day they painted the back of my safety shoes bright yellow when I wasn't looking. I never know what they're going to do next.

"My husband and my three sons think my job is great. In fact, when I was in school at Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology, I would take home wrenches and clamps at various stages of completion. My three sons (6, 7, and 8) thought this was great and always wanted to take the tools to school for 'show and tell'.

"I'm really happy with what I'm doing... I only wish my dad was here to see it."

● "I like hammering and using a saw!
"I took the four year business program when I was in high school and I wanted to be a secretary, but now I know I just couldn't sit in an office.

"When I finished school I worked as a cashier, but I didn't like it. The line-ups were so long that I got nervous. Some people would complain about the food or the cost, but it wasn't my fault!

"My dad's a carpenter and I used to help him out a bit. I never thought I'd be doing woodworking myself. Things just happened. My boyfriend offered me a job here building trusses—that's the peaked part of the roof before you put on the plywood sheathing.

"I started working and liked it. Soon a man came down from ITB asking me whether I wanted to go on apprenticeship. He told me what it was all about and I filled out the forms. I'll have to go up to Thunder Bay to the college for ten weeks for two sessions.

"My hours are 8 to 5, and at first I was really tired. I had to work overtime for a while and my bones were aching! Every day when I got home, my mother asked,

Bonnie Strom, 19
Apprentice Woodworking Machinist
Sault Carpenters Sault Limited
People's Road and Second Line
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

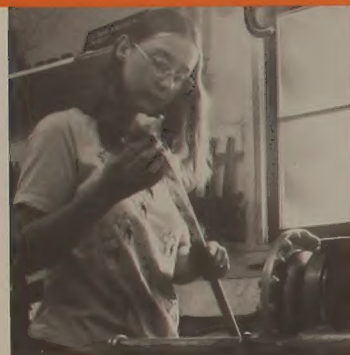
"Do you really like it?" But I've got no regrets. And the money's good.

"I build all types of trusses: kingpost (the most asked for), girder, hip, monopitch, scissor, singlepost and cantilever. And there used to be a truss called 'link' but they don't build them any more because they don't give enough support!

"I took into the truss book to find out the exact measurements before I begin working. I carry in lumber (the most difficult part), cut the pieces for the trusses, nail the metal plates on one side, flip the truss over onto the rollers which press the boards into place, and then put the truss on a pile.

"In the winter, when things get slow, we go over to the other shop and learn how to do other things. I'd like to build cupboards, window frames, and toyboxes, too.

"I don't care how long the apprenticeship will take me. I want to finish it. Family plans aren't going to interfere with my work!



Deborah Davies, 21
Apprentice Plumber
Davies Plumbing and Heating
89 Avonlea Road
Ingersoll, Ontario

● "I like repairing things. People phone up with a problem and I try to help them. You never know what you're going to get, so you have to improvise at times.

"I'm apprenticing with my dad who is a plumber. I remember riding back and forth to school with toolboxes. If he had a service call, I would go with him and hand him the tools.

"I was going to be a school teacher. That's what everybody said I should be. I applied to Western, Waterloo and McMaster and was accepted by all three, but I decided to stay home and work. At first, I did clerical work in the office, but when people began asking me questions, I wanted to be able to give them the right answers, so I decided that I wanted that certificate on the wall which said I was a plumber.

"I decided to apply for registration as an apprentice to the Industrial Training Branch of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. Later I was referred by the ITB to Fanshawe College of Applied Arts and Technology in London for the in-school part of the program.

"The first day was frightening because I was the only girl in the class. I thought, 'The boys will reject me. They won't talk to me. They'll hate me.' But it wasn't true. I never met so many nice guys in one

place, at one time!

"I do a little bit of everything right now, but mostly repair work: I fix taps, toilets, and unplug sinks.

"Schooling doesn't present any problems. We do two hours of welding a week, two hours of blueprint reading, plumbing math and plumbing science and English. We learn all about the properties of metals, and how they react to steam and chemicals.

"I think I tend to be a little neater than my dad and my brother, Paul. They scatter tools all over the place and then can't find them. But I put them back in the box and waste less time looking for things. If I'm working in a kitchen or bathroom, I don't leave a mess—because of my experience with housekeeping—but the boys usually leave the clean-up to the owner.

"There are some disadvantages to being a girl.

"I'm not as strong as the men and can't lift the same things. But I'm three times as strong as I used to be when I just pushed a pen around! Dad used to lift things for me. Now I can carry almost everything. I lift toilets, bathtubs, tool boxes... and you'd be surprised how heavy tool boxes can get.

"My fiancé thinks it's great that I'm a plumber.

"I'd rather do plumbing than anything else!"



Diane Carlson, 32
Nilha Nolin, 31
Motor and Equipment Repairers-Apprentices
Astro Electric Co. Limited
65 White Oak Drive
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

● Nilha: I was home for 13 years as a housewife, and was 'Mrs. Clean.' When I first began to work here, the smell and the dirt used to really bother me. But not anymore! Now it's my husband who comes home clean from work and I come home dirty!

Diane: I've been working almost since the day I married because my husband had a bad accident in the mines at Thompson, Manitoba. I had done so many things: plumbing, furniture upholstery, antique finishing, dressmaking, commercial cooking.

Nilha: I never in 100 years thought I'd be welding! I'm not especially mechanically inclined. Would you believe that I used to be afraid to turn on the Coleman stove?

At first, the welding torch connections looked like a mess to me, but they don't take long to learn.

Diane: And if you don't ask, you'll never learn!

Nilha: I got into this trade kind of accidentally. My husband's aunt is a coil winder, so I knew these occupations were available. But I didn't know what they involved. I saw an ad in the paper for a Manpower course on women in non-traditional trades, and I decided to take it. That's where I met Diane.

Diane: Our instructor at the College took us around to the different firms to show us the available trades, but it was up to us to get hired.

Nilha: We felt we could handle it here at Astro Electric. It has to do with the atmosphere. When it's a small plant people are more willing to help.

Diane: And you get to do and learn everything.

Nilha: We usually start out with a motor which is burnt-out. We chop one side of the coils, file and clean them and blow off the dust before we paint them. We put paper insulating liners between the phases, on top of the coils. We cut sheets of insulation between the coils to separate the grips. Next, we do the connections and sleeving and then pick the lead wires. The paint is burnt off the wires; they're wiped off and soldered. The connections are laid down and both ends are taped. The motor is heated up so that the varnish will stick better and then it's baked for about six hours.

Diane: That sounds like a recipe for a cake! Sometimes it does feel like an assembly-line in a bake shop. There used to be four or five guys doing this but now Nilha and I do it all!

Nilha: Diane and I have a good system. We switch so it doesn't get boring. I really like to do the connecting.

Diane: I prefer to put in the coils. They practically fall in now that we know how to make them. We can do three and a half to four a day, and they look just like a Slinky! But you have to build up the callouses on your fingers first.

Nilha: The copper is really hard on your fingers. You have to use pumice stone to soften them up later.

Diane: You do lose your sense of touch a bit; I made doll clothes a while ago and it wasn't as easy as it used to be. The fine line finishing turned out to be a bit sloppy.

Nilha: I've done various things: I've been a waitress, sold advertising and worked in a music shop. But I like what I do now so much better! It makes you feel good when you test your work and you hear that nice little 'buzz' sound that means it works.



Theresa Henderson, 42
Small-Engine Mechanic Apprentice
Alleyway and Bedford Limited
111 Tancred Street
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

● "First of all, my name is Mrs. Henderson. I'm no women's libber!

"I have always been mechanically inclined. I've been around cars and trucks all my life. I helped my father fix them, tear them down and put them back together. He's a retired licensed auto-body mechanic. And he was a blacksmith. So if he couldn't buy something right away, he'd make it!

"We've always discussed what he's been doing; I'm my father's third son. I always have been.

"I missed getting into the mechanical course at high school by one year. The school dropped it just as I came in. I always liked working with my hands, so when I got bored with being at home I decided to take a course in Marine and Small Parts Equipment. This course covers all marine engines (other than diesels) and also lawnmowers, snowblowers, chain saws, and anything else that has a small gasoline-powered engine (with the exception of motorcycles).

"The course is interesting; at the Northern Campus we built our own workbenches, using specific measurements and following blueprints. I learned how to use power tools. I now know how to use a welding torch, even if I'm scared to death of the damn thing!

"We also spray-painted, a prime requisite for this type of work. When you reserve the hull of a boat or repair a hole in a Skidoo, for example, you build up the hole until it gets smaller and smaller. A good deal of fibreglassing is done. And when you're finished you paint it.

"I'm older than my instructor. The six men (I'm the only female) always help me, but I think that women who are interested should be young and strong. The work involves lifting a lot of outboard motors and power tools. And you have to be very alert because there's a lot of theory in the classroom.

"Right now I don't do any mechanical work at Alleyway and Bedford. Mr. MacDonnell, the owner, is training me to be a sales specialist. He's trying to help me to use my skills in a more theoretical way where he thinks I will be most effective. I'm taking an inventory of the stock for small parts and small motors, and posting sales to get an idea of what moves and what doesn't, and to get an idea of what parts are carried in stock. My boss has been in charge of a great number of people for a great number of years; he knows what he's doing.

"I like it. And my son thinks it's a gas!"



Wendy Labrecque, 23
Apprentice Auto Body Mechanic
Mount Pleasant Motors
630 Mount Pleasant Road
Toronto, Ontario

● "When I tell people I work at Mount Pleasant Motors, they ask: 'In the office?' and I answer, 'No, as a mechanic,' their faces drop.

"I worked in an office for two years after grade 12, but office work drove me crazy. My boyfriend is a mechanic and suggested that I become an apprentice. I laughed at first, but I then thought, 'Why not?'

"My mother says I was a tomboy when I was a kid. Later, I tinkered with my car and did all sorts of work around the house, like painting. Then, I worked part-time pumping gas when I was in high school.

"It was a long time before anybody hired me as an apprentice auto body mechanic. I had a two-hour interview here and I guess they recognized my enthusiasm and determination—and hired me!

"Initially I took a 25 percent drop in salary when I left office work to become an apprentice. Of course I will earn more when I have finished my training but I do it mainly because I really like it.

"I change oil and filters, lubricate cars, and do small jobs, like replacing rocker-cover gaskets. Nothing major—like tune-ups—yet. But I really want to get into fixing the cars up. I would like to open my own shop when I get my licence. Or become shop foreman

or service manager.

"My enthusiasm for the job hasn't decreased since I began work here, although I've put up with a lot of 'garbage jobs'. The guys are a great help. They take the time to show me how to do things right.

"My first day was a disaster. The guys snickered all day long. They thought it was a big joke. But now that they've accepted the fact that I'm here to do the job the same as they, they treat me seriously.

"Where did you ever get the nerve to do it?" people ask. Well, before I knew it, I had the job and couldn't back out, although I was terribly nervous, but also very determined. And once you're determined to do something, you'll succeed!

"I get no special treatment and don't want any. Some of the work is heavy and my arms and legs were sore at first. But I'm getting used to it now. There's nothing particularly hard to handle."

"One sixty-year-old lady enviously said to me: 'I wish I was born in your generation' when I told her I was a mechanic.

"I'll never go back to an office. A person has to be happy at a job or there is no sense in it."



Bonnie Berta, 23
Apprentice Saw Filer-Fitter
Sudbury Sharp-All
2406 Field Street
Sudbury, Ontario

● "A saw filer? Well, it's someone who sharpens, sets and reconditions blades. A saw filer-fitter puts in the tips and flanks of blades and tensions them.

"Right now, I'm strictly a filer. I work on five machines, mainly hand and circular saws. But I have another 20 to 25 machines to cover yet. I'll be dealing with anything from a three-inch hand saw to an 84-inch circular saw or a 14-inch-wide band saw. It's not really dangerous work as long as you are careful.

"The sharpening process itself may take from ten minutes for a hand saw in good condition to one and a half hours for the large band saws used in the mills. We do chain saws, too. The chain is removed and then ground to precision.

"I think there are some advantages to being a female saw filer-fitter. I seem to control the machinery better. My dad, who runs the business, tells me I've got an accurate touch, especially for finer adjustments. But it took me a good two months to convince

him that I could operate the machines. Before he took me on as an apprentice in January, he was set on hiring a male. He tried friends, and even my husband, but they didn't have enough patience for it. Some came and left the same day. But I've stuck it out and really like it.

"We work long and difficult hours and, at times, the work gets tedious, so I feel that only women who are really interested should try it. We start at 7:45 in the morning. Usually, little can be done during the day, what with phone calls and customers coming in. But I work steadily in the shop from 6 until 9 or sometimes 10 in the evenings.

"We serve all sectors of the community: schools, all levels of government, industrial and commercial companies.

"The customers have been satisfied with everything I've done so far.

"And I'm happy too!"



Sharon Scott, 26
Welder
Westinghouse Co. Limited
Power Transformer Division
1632 Burlington Street East
Hamilton, Ontario

● "If you can draw a straight line, you can weld. But you also need the willpower to do it.

"I was always interested in mechanics. When I was in high school, I wanted to be an auto body mechanic but at that time girls weren't allowed to take those courses. So I took a commercial course instead.

"Later I worked in a fiberglass shop as a laminator, and in a shotgun repair shop, too. I had no problems working with men, then or now. When the fiberglass firm moved to Toronto, I decided that I really wanted to go into welding, so I took a course at Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology.

"The day I passed my test I was so excited that I ran up and down the halls telling people.

"I started working at Westinghouse in January, 1975. I thought I'd have a lifting problem because I'm so small: 5 feet, nothing! But you never lift anything heavy by yourself; you either have a helper with you

or use a crane.

"I like everything about welding. It's nice to be able to accomplish something. You see your work put through the water and oil test and you see that it's solid. It's a good feeling!

"What I really want to get into, though, is arc welding. It's awfully smoky, but really pretty—with the blue haze around the flame. And there's a variety of things you can do, such as horizontal or vertical arc welding from blueprints.

"I'd recommend welding to any woman. There's nothing to be afraid of. Some think they're going to get burned. But if you do it properly you won't.

"One of my dreams is to go up to Alaska some day and work on the pipeline.

"I'm in welding because I want to be. There should be no reason why a woman can't do anything she wants to."